[The Successful Farmer]

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Mr. James L. McElroy

Farmer

295 Olgethorpe Avenue

Athens, Georgia

By Sadie B. Hornsby

THE SUCCESSFUL FARMER

Mr. [McMurray?] was sitting at his desk in the front hall near the door engaged in thumbing over one paper after another. The papers were evidently of importance and pertaining to his business affairs, for some he lingered over longer than others. It was obvious that he was so absorbed in his task that he didn't hear my approach to the front porch, for when I knocked on the door it startled the old man, and he jumped as if something unexpected had happened.

“Mr. McMurray is tall and portly, with white hair, faded blue eyes, and a face which is criss-crossed with wrinkles and deeply tanned and roughened by the sun, wind, and rain of eighty-two years. His gray, shaggy eyebrows hang over his silver-rimmed glasses.

It was an effort for him to get up from the chair as he is badly crippled in his right leg from the waist down. He hobbled to the door saying, “Good morning,” and before I had a chance to state my mission he added, “Now if it's something you want to sell, young

woman, I'm not interested, and don't have the money to invest in anything. I don't read much now, for I can't see good like I used to."

After I had explained the object of my visit, he invited me in. "Come in, won't you, or had you rather sit on the porch? But if it's all the same to you we'll sit here in the hall, 'cause the sun hurts my eyes. You'll have to excuse the house; the woman folks are cleaning house and have everything 2 torn up."

There was a loud noise in the back of the house, and asking to be excused a minute, he called out, "Sue, are you moving the Frigidaire? You go careful. If you jar some of the electrical parts loose it will cost me several dollars to have it fixed." The noise stopped and a Negro boy and an older Negro went into a room down the hall and came out carrying an old-fashioned dresser.

Mr. McMurray said to the woman who made her appearance about that time, "What in tarnation are you going to do with that dresser?"

"Taking it up the stairs," she replied.

"What for?" he wanted to know.

"Because there is no sense having two dressers in one room, and there is nothing else up there." Nothing more was said and he resumed his conversation.

"Now, just to tell you the truth, I don't know anything about legends connected with Athens or any place near by. All I ever heard connected with Athens was when the Yankees came through. A man, who was in the crowd at that time, told me when the Yankees came through here a band of them began to steal everything they could get their hands on, as well as molested the women and children. Our boys caught the ringleader of the gang, hung him up by his thumbs in a clump of woods on the other side of town, and the others got away."

I heard the one he called Sue call, “Sister Ruth, have you put your vacuum cleaner up?”

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“No”.

“Well, let me use it for a while.”

“All right, go in my room and get it.”

The noise from the cleaner began in the room the dresser was removed from. Mr. McMurray called in a sharp voice, “Sue, cut that blame thing off. I can't hear a word this lady had to say”.

There was no response, and the noise continued. He got up from his chair, hobbled into the room, and closed the door. The noise within ceased. He seemed embarassed over the condition of the torn-up house, as there was a conglomeration of furniture throughout the full length of the hall - many old-fashioned chairs, sofas, tables, and what not. Through an open door in what appeared to be the dining room, I saw an old square dining table with a lovely crocheted cloth on it.

My host returned and sat down in a large rocker, after he had stopped the noise and confusion. “Now, where do you want me to begin? Would you like to know about my father first? Well, he was a famous Baptist preacher. He served as pastor for a number of churches for years. Some of them he preached at as long as twenty-five years hand running.

“I was born at Watkinsville, in Clarke County then but [Ocenee?] County now, on June 21, the longest day in the year, 1857. My father left Watkinsville when I was quite a child. He moved out here about a quarter of a mile on Mitchell's Bridge Road. My father owned a large gin and grist mill. He ginned cotton and ground corn into meal for everybody around Athens. I know one thing I did as a boy. I have hauled hundreds of bushels of corn in

4 winter right by this very house in those days when the road was a foot deep in mud. The corn was ground between two huge stones pulled around and round by mules or horses. Now all that is done by electricity and the meal is ground by wheels pulled by belts connected to the grinder.

“When I was a boy I had to walk four miles to school every day, four there and four back, making eight miles a day. Now children can't walk up here several blocks to college. I went to school here in Athens to a private school for boys, taught by Mr. Scudder. The school in recent years has been converted into a dwelling house. It is standing on the original spot, next to the First Presbyterian Church. After I finished there, which took me three years, I went to another private school taught by Sylvamis Morris and Judge Lumpkin. I went there three years. Among other subjects I took was bookkeeping. I have never used it only in my own business. That old school stood where the Fowler house is now, and recently bought by a fraternity. The school I went to was a residence converted into a schoolhouse and was known at that time as the Old Charbonnie House. Schools won't as good in those days as they are now, and that was the last place I went to school. I didn't go to college. It took a heap of money to go to college back in my young days.

“Yes, mam, I have been here a long time. Why, I remember when there won't nothing but houses on Clayton Street with the exception of where Sun's Drug Store is now was a blacksmith shop. And I have seen mud half a leg deep on Broad Street after a heavy rain, and I remember when the first paving was laid, but of course I don't remember the year as my mind is too short now to recall the exact year.

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“I helped my father on the farm and at the cotton gin until I was twenty-one years of age, doing everything that came to hand, working on the farm in season and at the cotton gin and grist mill in the fall and winter. When I became a free man I married and went to farming for myself. I still farm, but it is run by tenant labor. I've been very successful handling labor. One Negro family has been on my farm twenty-five years and another has

been with me twenty-three. I have a twenty-five horse farm; therefore, I have several other families living on it. The cotton gins are quite different now from what they were when I was a boy. The old ones were fed by hand.

“After my father died I moved to town. A man had bought and built this house. He also owned two lots next to this one. Times got tight with him and he came near losing his property and this house he lived in at the time. I bought this property from him, which caused him to get on his feet and start all over again. That was twenty-seven years ago.

“When I moved to town I built a modern gin, grist mill, and shingle mill, also a feed mill. I have ginned as high as three thousand bales of cotton in one season, but the Government has cut the cotton acreage down so my boys didn't gin but a little better than six hundred bales last year. The report on cotton is it seems much larger than last year.

“I have been nearly killed several times fooling around the cotton gin. When I was running a water pipe to the gin, I had to connect it with the water main over here at the Co-ordinate College. Of course I had secured permission from the proper authorities. You have to be careful that the pipes are free of dirt, so I picked up a long pipe to knock the dirt out before 6 the men working on the main laid it. In doing so I struck [?] pipe and it knocked me flat on the ground senseless. If I had not been standing on grass and it was dry I wouldn't have known what death I died with.

“One day while working around the gin, the cuff of my shirt caught on a line shaft and [??] around for some time before the machinery could be stopped and I was pulled out. Every stitch of clothing was torn from my right side but the cuff of my shirt. My hip was badly mangled and it was thought for a long time I would never walk again without the aid of crutches. I was about fifty-five years old when that happened.

“I told you that I ran a shingle mill in connection with my cotton gin. Do you see my hand, with the two fingers gone? Well, let me tell you how it happened. I had an [emery?] wheel attached to the machinery on my shingle mill. I had just finished whetting a saw. I noticed

the shingles were banking up, and very carefully I reached my hand down between the saws to scatter the shingles. When I pulled my hand out it was in some way knocked up against the saw. It sawed two fingers off in less than a second, and they flew out and hit the wall about ten feet from me.

“W-e-l-l, it's like this, what I made on my gin, grist, and shingle mill, has enabled my to buy what property I cared to own. I fed, clothed, educated, and gave my children a few opportunities those times could afford. I have started each of my ten children out in business. I think that is evident of what the success the gins and farm has been.

“I was the father of thirteen children, buy only eleven of them lived to 7 be grown and married. One of my daughters died soon after her first child was born, and the child died a few weeks later, but her husband is dead now. All of my children have a high school education, and four or five of them finished college. The rest of them wouldn't go. My wife and I were married sixty-one years before her death. She died this past December, and my oldest child will be sixty years old his next birthday.

“My widowed daughter and her little boy are living with me now, sorter keeping things together for me. But I am going to get married again just as soon as I can find some nice lady that will have me. You don't know a nice woman about fifty or sixty who would like a nice home and a good husband? If you do, tell them about me. If I married again my children would have a fit, but I don't see why, because as fast as their wives or husbands died they were ready to get them somebody else.

“Due to my father being a Baptist preacher, nautrally all of us belong to the Baptist church, and so to speak I was born in the church. Rain or shine, snow or blow, that is one thing my father demanded of us. My mother made preparations on Saturday, and bright and early Sunday morning if it was a country church my father served and it was a good distance from home we set forth to be there on time.”

The telephone rang, and the young woman he called Sue answered. Then she called to Mr. McMurray, “Papa, hurry and come on. Maybelle is waiting on us.”

He said to me, “Everything is so turn up here today, one of my daughters has invited us to have dinner with her. I am sorry to have to go, but you 8 know when a woman gets a meal ready it makes them mad to keep 'em waiting. Suppose you go by the gin on the way to town and look the gin over. But, before you go, I want to show you something I picked up in the field on my farm. Here it is. I used it for a paper weight all these years. Some people tell me it looks like a pine cone petrified. It does resemble one, but the sections that form the burr are diamond shaped and clear as crystal. Some of my folks took ink and traced around each of the sections that form the burr. I meant to take it down town and have it cleaned, but I have never gotten around to it. Here is a rock I found. It looks like it was shaped by an expert. I have found many arrow-heads, pots, and things in days gone by left by the Indians. I have often been sorry my wife let the children break them. It has always puzzled me what the Indians used these two rocks for. The round one is an inch thick and of solid black rock, and the other one is oblong and exactly a half inch through, and of perfectly white rock.”

The girls called him again, and he hobbled to the door with me, saying, “Be sure and go by the gin and ask the boys to show you how it is operated.”

When I reached the McMurray Brothers Gin the next morning there was a middle-aged man sitting on a split-bottom chair leaning against the building, holding the reins of the mules standing in front of the mill, while their master was unloading corn to be ground into meal. I asked the man if he was Mr. McMurray.

“No, mam, I am just their first cousin, but I hang around here when I don't have nothing else to do. You will find them inside. Just go on in.” The man who was standing at the grinder, grinding meal when I entered 9 the building didn't see me at first. Finally he looked up and came toward me. “Good morning. What can I do for you?”

“I explained my visit to him. He nodded his head, pointed his thumb over his shoulder, and said in a gruff voice, “Go in the gin house. You will find my brother in there mending a belt. He will tell you what you want to know. I haven't got time myself. I have fifty bushels of corn to grind into meal right away.”

As I started to thank him, he said, “Not at all,” and, scratching his head vigorously, he returned to his task.

I followed his directions and found his brother mending the belt. After I had explained what I wanted, he said, “I never was a hand to explain things so a person could understand what I'm talking about, but I'll be glad to show you around and tell you what I know about it.

“My father turned this over to [us?] five boys about twenty years ago. If you like this kind of work it is very interesting. There used to be money in this sort of work when we took/ it over. All of us have families and from the proceeds of this we have done the best we could by them. Educated our children and have given them a few advantages of life.

“I've seen the time when we ginned cotton day and night, of course in season. And have ginned as high as thirty-three hundred bales of cotton in one season. Times were good then, but since that time there has come an awful change. Each year we have ginned less and less cotton. Last year was our shortest year and we only ginned six hundred and thirty bales. As a rule, 10 a man can pay for his ginning out of his seed from the cotton. It cost around $2.50 to gin a bale, but this year, as I see it now, the seed from a bale won't pay for it; as cotton seed is selling for 75¢ a hundred pounds.

“Do you see that pipe that begins over there by the door? The cotton is hauled here and the people drive on those scales in front of the door. After the cotton is weighted, that suction pipe is placed in the wagon of cotton and draws the cotton into the gin. This wheel here is governed by air control and when that large pipe is full it trips the wheel. The air is cut off until the pipe is cleared and it cuts on again.” He opened the drums, explaining,

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“This is where the seed is taken from the cotton. The brushes back of the saw cut and card the cotton as it is cut from the seed by the saws in front of the brush. These seed go through the trough until they reach the trap door here. Do you see this roller? Well, it turns the seed into the pipe below and they are carried through that pipe until they reach the seed house at the corner of the lot cut there.

“While that is going on, the cotton drops in this hopper. When it is full, do you see this round circle in the floor? We spring the trap and this round section revolves to where the bale is shaped. Where the bagging and ties are placed, as this hopper fills with cotton to be pressed into bales, it gradually rises until the bottom of the bale reaches the level of the floor. Then the ties are buckled over the bagging that holds the cotton.

“These stalls are used for storing seed. Do you see those trap doors at the back of the stalls near the floor? They open into a suction pipe. Often we store the seed for a man, and he will decide to sell us the seed. After 11 the purchase is made, we open those doors and the seed are carried to the seed house through a pipe. Lots of times a man will haul cotton here in the rain and the cotton is stored in those stalls until it is dry enough to gin. We don't make no extra charge for those things, for a fellow in business has to do lots of accommodating to hold their customers.

“During ginning season we work night and day. It keeps all of us on the jump, and we hire quite a lot of help. Some we pay $2 a day and others $3. Of course we do pay a few as low as 75¢. $3 a day includes day and night work. I couldn't say how much we make, as what we make is divided among us boys, and we at least make enough to keep our families from starving. However, fifteen or say eighteen years ago we made a good living out of ginning and gave our children a few advantages and a college education. So far our children don't have to help us, but we are getting old now, and if the ginning business keeps dropping off there is no telling what they will have to do.

“Since this country has cut down on cotton acreage, other countries are doubling theirs. Take Australia, which at one time was considered a small cotton country. It doubled its acreage in the last two years. Instead of this country exporting our cotton and cotton goods to other countries raising cotton, they are importing it to us each year by the million bales of both cotton and cloth. But I'm sure the reduction of acreage in this country is all right in its way, and these in charge surely know better than we what it is all about.

“Now come this way, and I'll show you the grist mill. All this machinery 12 in here controls it. This is the corn sifter. After the corn is shelled it is put in the sifter. This [?] sifter has a fan under it that blows the cornsilk from the corn, and the sifter catches the large pieces of cobs. The corn is then taken through the overhead pipe controlled by those belts you see, and is spilled into a smaller sifter where every particle of dust, dirt, and small bits of cobs are either blown out or left in the sifter. It then goes to the grinder and comes out nice clean meal. You won't find any worms, weevils, and trash in our meal. Some people just grind all that up in the meal, but we try to be careful about ours. We used to grind lots of meal, but now we grind just whatever amount of corn is brought to us.

“Look out of the window, and you'll see our mill for chopping oats up into [food?] stuff [?] stock. It is over to the left. That small contraption to the right is where we saw shingles. We take the lumber and saw it into the desired length, them feed it to the machine, and as you know one end of the shingle is much thicker than the other. Since composition and tin roofs are used now, we have very few calls for our shingles.

“The [sacks?] you see back of you here in the building are full of meal and corn. You are right, this machinery is dangerous, and you have to be on your guard at all times. But so far, none of us have been hurt in the past twenty years, but we did have a Negro to get his hand cut off in the cotton gin, and another his arm.”

While we were talking, a woman dressed in a pink [crepe?] dress and a boy in overalls drove up in front, with two miles hitched to a wagon. The woman and boy were sitting on

a board laid across the front of the wagon. There 13 were several sacks of corn, chickens, eggs, and watermelons in the back. The woman had her straight hair tucked back of her ears. She spit a mouthful of snuff on the ground, addressing Mr. [?]. “Do you have time to grind this corn by twelve o'clock?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“All right,” said the woman. “Git out of this here wagon, boy, and yank them there sacks of corn out. You know I've got to git to town and sell my chicken and watermelons before folks beat me selling theirs.”